

Lincoln as a Human Being

An Address Delivered in the Old South Church, Boston, Massachusetts, at the Morning Service, February 8, 1920, by the Rev. George A. Gordon, D.D.

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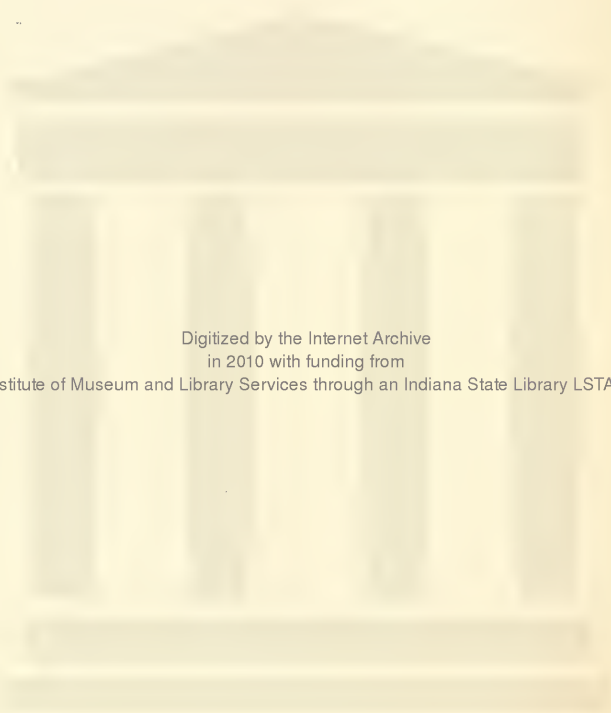
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FOR he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised; and we esteemed him not.

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . .

“Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by the knowledge of himself shall my righteous servant justify many; and he shall bear their iniquities.”

—Isaiah 53: 2-6; 10-12.



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"And a man shall be as . . . the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." — *Isaiah 32 : 2.*

In any survey of history one meets many men great in intellect, in poetic genius, in artistic power, in military renown and political glory who are not great as human beings. David Hume, Lord Byron, Titian, the mighty Cæsar, and the mightier Hannibal,—mightier far, surely, as a soldier,—are not significant as men; they are decidedly unattractive as human beings. There is, however, another class of men through whose genius streams their humanity as the sunshine flows through the air: Socrates, Dante, Michelangelo, Cromwell, soldier and statesman. These men all achieved great things, but through these great things there appear still vaster things,—themselves and the character of their humanity; ultimately their appeal is the appeal of the human being to human beings.

Here is Lincoln's place. He was great in political sagacity, in his power to say the right word at the right time, in his intuitive knowledge of men, in his control of men, and his command of the affections and the confidences of the American people; and yet through all these forms of greatness there appears something still greater,—Lincoln, the human being. You are in Chamonix, you are waiting impatiently for the radiant morning; it is here, and almost oblivious of

everything else you lift your eyes to the supreme wonder of Europe. Thus it is with Lincoln as he stands in the light of his own unique career; he himself is the great wonder, the endless fascination.

1. In the first place, Lincoln's political sagacity grew out of his character as a man. Let me take two examples of that sagacity. He has formulated in epigrammatic phrase the maxim and principle upon which democracy rests. He knew himself as fundamentally honest; he knew the multitude of his fellow citizens as, like himself, meaning well and fundamentally honest; he knew that the people as a whole and in the long run are trustworthy. "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." There is the breakwater against the worst storm that afflicts this Republic,—to which the weather that we have had this past week is a mere circumstance,—the unscrupulous and godless demagogue. The people of themselves would seldom go wrong; they seek good, and they do not want evil for good, a stone for a fish, a serpent for an egg; but because they are limited in knowledge they are misled. Let us give thanks that Lincoln saw that the people could not be permanently misled. You cannot fool all the people all the time; there is the breakwater; anchor inside of that. That insight came up out of Lincoln's character, his intellect discovered it in other men because directed and clarified by his own character.

Take another example. You recall that the Missouri Compromise, passed by Congress in 1820, forever excluded slavery from the territories north of parallel $36^{\circ}30'$; thereafter all foes of slavery and all good men were patient because it seemed that slavery was in process of natural extinction. But thirty-four years later, that is, in 1854, at the instigation of Stephen Arnold Douglas, Senator from the State of Illinois, Congress repealed the Missouri Compromise and passed the Kansas-Nebraska bill, whereby it became possible for the territories north of parallel $36^{\circ}30'$ to admit or reject slavery as they saw fit; and in 1857 came the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court of the United States declaring, by majority of the Court, that slavery could not be excluded from any territory under the jurisdiction of the Constitution. There was the dawn of a new day for human slavery and a new dismay and horror for all lovers of freedom throughout the north. Lincoln reviewed the situation in a great speech of characteristic humor, wisdom and self-control. He said that if four workmen, Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James, went into the woods at different times and in different places and cut down timber which, when the timbers were brought out, fitted exactly each into the other and made a dwelling, it might not be possible to prove, but it would be extremely probable that these four workmen had a preconcerted plan. Thus Lincoln drew an indictment against a United States senator, an ex-President of the United States, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and a majority of that Court, and the then President

of the United States; he won his case before the North, he won it before the whole nation, he has won it before the conscience of the world.

That political sagacity came up out of Lincoln's character as a man. He was so fundamentally honest and just that the sophistry of Douglas and Pierce,—or, as he called them in his familiar way, Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James,—their sophistry could not blur the penetrating light of that marvellous eye. Lincoln knew nothing about the great political philosophers of the world, in ancient Greece, in modern France, in Germany or in Great Britain; he knew the history of the United States, the history of the government of the United States; he knew the people of the United States, and his intellect, directed, clarified, dominated by his character, played upon the reality before him, upon American civil society; and thus the human being everywhere shines transcendent in the political wisdom of Abraham Lincoln.

2. I ask you to consider, in the second place, Lincoln's style in relation to his character. Lincoln was a western man, and the western orator, possessing as he does the fine qualities of force and magnetic power, inevitably tends toward over-emphasis, excess in the use of words, excess in the use of ornament; he is apt to turn his style into a peacock's tail spread in the sunshine, quivering and glittering there. How came it to pass that Lincoln, who never saw the inside of a college till he became the guest of a college, whose schooling was extremely limited, who was

in type a western man,—how came it to pass that he was classic in simplicity, in economy of words, in the severe structure of his sentences, in their swift, direct, inevitable movement to the issue intended, as an arrow in its flight? Whence came this concentration and power? This spoken literature, without the thought of literature, came up out of his character. To be sure, he had good models; he read the Bible till he knew much of it by heart. Young men, Abraham Lincoln never would have failed in an examination, as a young man at Harvard did some years ago, who, when asked who Hagar was, gave the answer, "One of the twelve apostles." Lincoln knew the Bible in its noblest speech by heart, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, another English classic; he knew Shakespeare as only a great humanist can know him. He read few books, but these few great books he read into his blood. That does not, however, explain Lincoln's style; for that we must go to Lincoln's character.

More than three hundred years before Christ, Plato said, "Style is the man." That is the soul of the subject laid bare. Lincoln's perceptions were so true, his feelings were so faithful to his perceptions, his imagination was so sound and just, his judgments so austere and honest, that when he looked round for words none could be accepted but those that would carry his meaning in the clearest and surest way. The style of Lincoln is one of the precious things in the records of American history, not only because it is beautiful in itself, but because it teaches that a great style can come only from a great character. Many are the similar cases that I have known in my

experience; humble women who have brought up families of children, women whose humanity has been cleansed by sorrow and by love, whose imagination has been exalted and greatened by religion, have written to their children at the ends of the earth notes that were gems of literature; their words and sentences came up out of character. There was the peasant mother of Thomas Carlyle; many of her letters are almost as worthy of preservation as any written by her illustrious son. You recall that letter which she wrote to her boy in Edinburgh University, as he was beginning to make his acquaintance with French infidelity, as he was bound to do as a scholar,—“O Tom, read your Bible, and if you ever repent it, let me bear the blame forever.” It would not be easy to find a finer sentence in Carlyle than that. I beg the young men and women to think of this. It is a just ambition to hope to use the English tongue with beauty and power. It cannot be done if you are not fundamentally honest, true in your nature, rich in noble sympathy; if you have not an imagination toned to the “still sad music of humanity,” if there is not in your heart an aspiration forever soaring after the ideal freedom and grace of existence.

3. The humor of Abraham Lincoln is another pathway to the man's character. That humor is, of course, interesting in itself, a precious possession of the nation in a hundred anecdotes; and men laugh and rejoice over Lincoln reminiscences in the hard struggle of the world, every week, every month, every year.

But the great significance of the humor of Lincoln is its revelation of the resourcefulness of the man, of the fact that he saw things in just perspective, that in a time of utmost confusion, when wild passions were running high, he could see things as they were; that in the tragedy he saw the comedy of life; like the poor woman of dignity who, when receiving the consolations of her rich neighbor, also a woman of dignity, made answer to the question, "Are you married?" from a resourceful nature, able to see the comedy in the tragedy of life, "No, but I have had other troubles."

You recall that when Abraham Lincoln came home from Bloomington where the Republican party held its convention and passed resolutions against the abominable Kansas-Nebraska bill; when he and his partner came back to Springfield they called for a mass meeting to support the Republican Convention and the speech that Lincoln made there; and the mass meeting consisted of three persons,—Lincoln, his partner, and a third person by the name of Paine. Lincoln was equal to the situation. He rose and said that the audience was larger than he knew it would be; he knew that he would be there, and he knew that his partner would be there, but he did not know that anybody else would be there; and he moved an adjournment and an appeal to the people.

Then came the great popular debate,—the greatest popular debate in the history of this country,—between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Arnold Douglas. Lincoln won that debate intellectually, as clear as the sun and as

fair as the moon and terrible as an army with banners; but Douglas was sent back to the Senate by the might of the unscrupulous politician. Some one asked Lincoln how he felt after his defeat and Douglas' success. "Well," he said, "I feel like the boy who stubbed his toe; it hurts too much to laugh, and I am too big to cry."

These are enough to set your minds working; there are others that come to my tongue, but I will repress them. Let me remind you again, however, that the significance of Lincoln's humor is the humanity of it; the humanity of the man who had a just perspective in the wild world, who saw little things as little, big things as big, and who kept his feet upon the bed of the river that he was crossing when the current was swollen and the tide ran with the strength of a torrent. Let me remind you of the beams of good cheer that came from the White House all through those troubled years; cheer upon cheer, as relief not only for his own great heart, but as relief and joy for the heart of the loyal North.

4. The sympathy of Lincoln is the crowning expression of his character. I do not now refer to the endless instances when this sympathy was expressed to individuals; his walking four miles after a hard day's work to rectify a mistake which he made as a shopkeeper in overcharging a poor woman for the goods sold; his ever-ready ear in behalf of soldiers who had fallen asleep at their post, not because they were faithless, but because they were worn out and could not help it. Lincoln would see no loyal boy shot because he broke

down under the test. Nor do I have in mind his sympathy for Northern men and women whose friends were in the South and who were continually asking to be allowed to come through the lines back home. All this I call the lyric of Lincoln's sympathy, a song new every morning and fresh every evening during those four long and terrible years. What I have in mind is the epic sympathy of Lincoln. He thought of the Nation as a mighty personality undergoing unspeakable woe; and that personality, with all its woe and all its possible weal, was continually in his imagination. He wore its sorrow on his face, he suffered in the Nation's stead. The great words in the chapter that I read to you this morning, I felt, as I read them, that you were applying to him; he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; by his stripes the nation was healed.

In all our history there is no such public soul as Lincoln; no such imagination reflecting in its depths the woe, the tragedy, and the hope of the nation; no such heart, with its silent unutterable sorrow, no such face under its crown of thorns. Let us give thanks for this unique American career. Let us think reverently of that log cabin in Kentucky where those amazing eyes first saw the light; let us think with gentle sympathy of that other still inferior log cabin in Indiana and the troubled years there, and the loss of the essentially beautiful mother. Let us think of the growing boy in Illinois, the shopkeeper, the hand on the Mississippi flat boat, student, lawyer,

legislator, member of the House of Representatives in the Congress of the United States; tribune of the people, unmatched in our whole history, President of the United States, the second Father of the American Republic; and everywhere and above all, let us think of him as the man, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

To thee the gods gave no Olympian brow;
 Thy face more marr'd than that of other men,
 O Lincoln; no wide share in thought or ken
 Of Sages old, but wit, pity and the bough
 Evergreen with wisdom, and from the slough
 Of Death, pow'r to lift a nation, as when
 God's right arm is bared; Kings before thee bow
 And hail thee 'mong the best of human kind,
 Sent hither in our need, divinely planned
 With mirth and sorrow's eyes; round thee shall
 wind

Immortal honor from a noble land,
 Whose brave thy martyr hands shall ever bind
 In service to the Life that bade thee die,
 Thou healing shadow of the Love Most High.

